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# DECONSTRUCTING CAPUTO'S DEMYTHOLOGIZING HEIDEGGER

George Connell

John Caputo's *Demythologizing Heidegger* represents an important, distinctive, and intriguing attempt to make sense of Heidegger's notorious involvement with Nazism. Where others have tended to emphasize biographical and sociological factors in understanding Heidegger's involvement with Nazism, Caputo traces that involvement to fateful turns in Heidegger's development as a thinker. While I am sympathetic with such an undertaking, I find Caputo's account highly questionable and even self-opposed, especially as regards his apparent valorization of Kierkegaard and of biblical faith as influences that could have saved Heidegger from Nazism had he not turned away from them in favor of Nietzsche and the presocratic Greeks.

Now that the breadth and depth of Heidegger's involvement with Nazism is clear, the question of the meaning of that involvement looms over all current critical engagements with Heidegger and his thought. While most prominent attempts to make sense of this great thinker's association with a demonic regime, in particular those of Farias, Ott, and Zimmerman, stress various aspects of Heidegger's social and cultural milieu, John Caputo's recent *Demythologizing Heidegger* represents an interesting contrast in telling a story of great beginnings going horribly awry because of a tragic flaw, a fatal blind spot, in its protagonist. In so doing, he periodizes Heidegger's career as a thinker, separating the basically sound and salutary work of the 20s from the dangerously misguided thinking subsequent to Heidegger's return from Marburg to Freiburg. Adding, as it were, a chapter to Eliza Butler's *The Tyranny of Greece Over Germany*, Caputo closely associates Heidegger's movement toward Nazism with his elevation of the Greeks, especially the Presocratics, to a unique and privileged status. As compelling and illuminating as Caputo's story is, I find fundamental elements of it highly questionable and even self-opposed. In particular, I have questions about the ways Caputo explicitly valorizes the biblical witness as a necessary corrective to philosophy while implicitly pressing a philosophical polemic against fundamental aspects of that biblical witness. It is in looking closely at Caputo's frequent but tendentious invocations of Kierkegaard in telling his story that I intend to expose these internal tensions. But first to a brief summary of that story.



*Heidegger's Wrong Kehring*

As I noted above, Caputo wants to distinguish fundamentally the Heidegger of the 20s from the Heidegger of the 30s and after. He characterizes the project of the earlier Heidegger as follows:

The first Freiburg project, entitled a "hermeneutics of facticity," took the form of a two-pronged retrieval: on the one hand, of the factual lifeworld of the New Testament communities, which lay sedimented beneath the dogmatic ontotheology of the tradition; and, on the other hand, of the factual lifeworld of Aristotelian ethics, which lay sedimented beneath the metaphysics of *ousia*. The movements and rhythms of these "prephilosophical" sources — life before the long arm of philosophical conceptuality reaches it — were to be the sources from which philosophy itself would draw a new breath. (DH 3-4)

As Caputo sees it, Heidegger's great insights and his great blindness combine in this project, just as the Greek tragic hero's distinctive virtue and tragic flaw are two sides of the same coin. And the common coin, on Caputo's reading, of Heidegger's insights and blindness, of his triumph and downfall, is that favorite postmodern denomination, otherness. First, Heidegger's project of a hermeneutics of facticity shows him to be (despite his later protestations) an existentialist, a philosopher committed to thinking life in all its thickness and solidity rather than simply playing a conceptual glass bead game. But existence, factual life, not only always ultimately eludes thought, it disrupts it. Caputo writes:

Heidegger's original strategy - to disrupt philosophy and the university by exposing it to philosophy's other - is brilliantly conceived. Heidegger wants to let philosophical conceptuality be disrupted by the concrete experience of life in the New Testament and by Aristotle conceived in terms of the practical philosophy rather than metaphysics. The disruption of philosophy so conceived was aimed at a renewal of philosophy, not simply of leaving philosophy behind. The whole notion of restoring life to its original difficulty, to all of the concreteness of facticity itself, taken in its original difficulty, to all of the concreteness of facticity itself, taken in its original Aristotelian and Kierkegaardian sense, is, I think, an immensely salutary and suggestive move. (DH 57)

A second salutary dimension of otherness Caputo finds in the "hermeneutics of facticity" project is Heidegger's readiness to bring together those two perennial others, Athens and Jerusalem, the Greek and the Hebraic. While many culture critics today would see in this a hegemonic privileging of ancient, patriarchal Mediterranean cultures, Caputo sees Heidegger's syncretism through the particular lens of the French postmodernist category of the "jewgreek." He writes:

The "jewgreek" is the miscegenated state of one who is neither pure-

ly Greek nor purely Jewish, who is too philosophical to be a pure Jew and too biblical to be pure Greek, who is attached to both philosophers and prophets....(DH 6)

By "jew" I mean above all what Lyotard calls *les juifs*, so that the expression "jewgreek" mean(s) everyone who is out, outside, silenced, deprived of an idiom or home or both, who is either forbidden to use or has learned to despise his mother tongue, everyone who is Abrahamic, driven from native land, and, over and beyond Abraham, everyone who is Ishmaelic, for Ishmael was disowned by Abraham and Sarah in the name of protecting the purity of their legitimate line. Jewgreek means Auschwitz, and every other name of ignominy and suffering, all the Auschwitizes, the victims of all the Nazisms, wherever they are found, in South Africa or the South Bronx, in El Salvador or Northern Ireland or on the West Bank.(DH 7)

But while Heidegger brilliantly expounded both Paul and Aristotle in his lectures of the 20s, he is by no stretch of the imagination a champion of the "jewgreek" as understood by Caputo. Hardly; such champions of the despised and excluded don't join the Nazi movement. And here lies the fundamental question for Caputo: How did the same philosopher who so beneficially opened philosophy to factual life and Greek thought to Jewish and Christian faith become a Nazi? In what is to me the most compelling dimension of this book, Caputo argues that Heidegger's failure to see the difference between the Jewish and the Greek blinds him to what is distinctively biblical: the identification of justice with response to the needs of widows and orphans, of strangers and lepers; the elevation of *kardia*, the love of the neighbor, as coequal and even equivalent to the love of God. Caputo shows that Heidegger's reading of Christian texts always focused on the themes of fighting the good fight, running the race, suffering the thorn in the flesh, taking up one's cross; all this he construes as versions of the Greek maxim that all beautiful things are difficult. But he failed to see that the Greek equations of the good and the beautiful, of excellence and virtue, are profoundly at odds with the biblical vision. Caputo writes:

So the fabric and texture of factual life were decidedly different in the two cases. On the one hand, a hermeneutics of excellence and *arete*, of putting everything in order with the order of rank. On the other hand, a hermeneutics not of glory but of humiliation, not of the strong and erect but of those who have been laid low, not of the great but of the small, not of the straight but of the crooked and bent, not of the beautiful but of the ugly, not of athletes but lepers, not of *eudaimonia* but of misery, not of prudence but of mercy, not of order of rank but of all those who drop to the bottom of wherever a *logos* and a *polemos* shake things down and distribute them into a hierarchy. (DH 62-3)

Caputo convincingly shows that Heidegger was effectively oblivious to this dimension of the New Testament. But Caputo goes on to claim, first, that this obliviousness leads to Heidegger's elevation of the Greeks to mythic status and, further, to his infamous and never recanted involve-

ment with the Nazis. What case does he make for these claims?

At its least controversial but also lamest, Caputo's indictment is one of omission rather than commission. In the final two pages of Chapter Two, he repeats with minor variation an almost ritual incantation:

So there was nothing in Heidegger's appropriation of the New Testament ... to serve as a precaution against the reading that Ernst Jünger gave to pain..There was nothing in this hermeneutics to resist Nietzsche's famous saying ...[that] what does not kill me makes me stronger. In short, there was nothing in Heidegger's hermeneutics of factual life in the New Testament to insulate him against the contempt and scorn which Jünger and Nietzsche would heap upon New Testament ethics,....

There was nothing in Heidegger's appropriation of the New Testament categories to lead him to look upon the events of history from the view of the victims of history,....

There was, as it turned out, nothing ... to stop it from running straight into *Kampf*-philosophy, a great myth of Being's struggle in and through a people chosen by Being's hand....(DH 58-9)

Now, this is a pretty weak indictment, as Caputo effectively admits with his completion of the last sentence quoted above: "...—even as there was originally nothing about it intrinsically to necessitate such a fateful turn."(DH 59) How, then, does Caputo build his case for the ambitious thesis that Heidegger's misreading of the New Testament somehow leads him to aggrandize hyperbolically the Greeks and to become a Nazi? And how does he support the initially outrageous claim that immoderate Hellenophilism somehow predisposes one to or outright causes Nazism?

A clue to answering this question is to be found in the passage just quoted in which Caputo expands his reference to *kampf*-philosophy with the phrase, "a great myth of Being's struggle in and through a people chosen by Being's hand..."(DH 59) Caputo here refers to Heidegger's belief that the early Greeks had been granted a special awareness of Being that had subsequently been lost but which it was now up to the Germans to reawaken. On the first page of *Demythologizing Heidegger*, Caputo describes this belief, which he calls the myth of being, thus:

By [the myth of Being] I mean the tendency of Heidegger to construct a fantastic portrait of the Greek sources of Western thought and culture — in the most classically German manner — and to represent these Greek sources as a single, surpassing, great "Origin" (*Ursprung*), a primordial incipience or "Beginning" (*Anfang*) of the West. On such a scheme the Greeks do not represent merely the historical start of certain Western linguistic, scientific, and social traditions. For Heidegger, "Greeks" are nothing merely "historical" (*geschichtlich*) at all, but something destining (*geschicklich*), something steering the very destiny (*Geschick*) of the West,.... These Greeks represent an overarching, normative claiming Origin to which "we" — and who "we" are is a critical issue here — are all bound more pri-

mordially than we can say and in reference to which everything later is to be compared, either as falling away and oblivion or as the scene of its retrieval.”(DH 1)

It is this myth that Caputo targets in titling his book, *Demythologizing Heidegger*. According to Caputo, it is this dimension of Heidegger’s thought that needs to be exposed, questioned, deconstructed and removed if that thought is to be rehabilitated and employed by right thinking people today; for it is this aspect of Heidegger’s thought that marked it as genuinely Nazi. He writes:

It cannot be forgotten that it was in the context of the National Socialist seizure of power that Heidegger narrowed down the beginnings of the West to a single “Origin” - *Anfang* and *Ursprung* — purely Greek, without Jewish and Christian contamination, and tied the future of the West to the German future, to the German capacity for thinking and questioning Being. The first form of the myth of Being is a political myth tied to a hellish ideology, fully equipped with robust and quite bellicose Greek gods and their German heirs, in which Heidegger undertook to produce a thought of Being that was *Judenrein*, thereby reproducing on the level of thinking what the Nazis were doing in the streets.(DH 4)

As Caputo tells it, Heidegger’s failure to grasp the distinctiveness of the New Testament (as opposed to the Greeks) leads to a onesided emphasis on struggle and strife, or, to use his loaded term, *kampf*. This, in turn, leaves Heidegger prone to the anti-Christian diatribes of Jünger and Nietzsche and thus leads to an attempt to purge all Semitic elements from his thought so as to fulfill the Germanic mission of retrieving that which is pure Greek. And this is the intellectual analog to Hitler’s project of reestablishing Aryan racial purity.

As a work of historical explanation, this narrative is highly questionable. First, huge gaps loom between causes and effects. For example, one could well emphasize the stress and struggle aspects of the New Testament - one thinks of Karl Barth’s commentary on Romans in which militaristic imagery abounds - without ultimately becoming either anti-Christian or Nazi. And one could respond positively to Nietzsche’s anti-Christian diatribes without feeling any attraction to the Nazis. Further, Caputo’s account seems self-opposed. Heidegger’s failure to see the difference between Greek and New Testament values ultimately leads him to purge all traces of the New Testament from his thought because of its perceived difference from the Greek? Ultimately, if we judge Caputo’s book as a piece of historical explanation, it is a failure.

But it is a mistake to read Caputo’s book as a rival historical and biographical explanation to those of, say, Ott and Zimmerman. Just as Bultmann’s project of demythologizing focused on the contemporary significance of the biblical kerygma, Caputo’s *Demythologizing Heidegger* focuses on the contemporary significance of Heidegger’s thought. But Caputo uses the word “demythologizing” with a caveat: he denies that it is

possible to arrive at some naked, absolute truth through such a process. Since, as he sees it, we always view reality through one myth or another, myth here designating broadly a contingent conceptual or narrative scheme, to demythologize is really to remythologize. By his own admission, then, Caputo is constructing a mythic account of Heidegger which, like Heidegger's mythic accounts of the Greeks, is intended to guide and shape contemporary thinking and acting rather than just to contemplate the past. The real point of Caputo's book is to denounce as Nazi in spirit any attempt to single out, to privilege, to keep pure any one people or culture or faith. In presenting the cautionary tale of how Heidegger went astray, Caputo effectively makes a plea for the vision that sails today under the flag of multiculturalism. He writes:

The result, or one possible result, of this demythologizing is a world that, with the exception of its ecologism, Heidegger - the man - would abhor. It is a multilingual, multicultural, miscegenated, polymorphic, pluralistic world without national-ethnic unity, without the unity of a single language or a deep monolingualistic tradition. It is a world of gay rights and feminists, of radically democratic, anti-hierarchical, anti-elitist structures, with a pragmatic view of truth and principles, and in which children would be educated not in a classical Gymnasium but in free public institutions with schools in which Andy Warhol would get as big a hearing as Sophocles and Aeschylus, schools filled with computers and the latest technological advances, schools that would make a particular effort to reach the disadvantaged. Heidegger would rather be dead. (DH 97)

#### *Caputo's Kierkegaard*

Caputo's intention to read the Heidegger affair as a cautionary tale full of present significance is reflected in the way that Caputo constantly uses the contemporary thinkers, Levinas, Lyotard, and Derrida, as foils to expose what is right and what is wrong with Heidegger's thinking.<sup>1</sup> But given this prospective emphasis on how these three French thinkers develop elements of Heidegger in very different ways than Heidegger did, what sense can we make of Caputo's retrospective emphasis on Kierkegaard? Throughout Caputo's narrative of Heidegger's development, Kierkegaard figures decisively. First, Heidegger's varying relations to the Dane serve to demarcate both the beginning and the end of the salutary "hermeneutics of facticity" stretch of the *Denkweg*. As Caputo sees it, Heidegger's first (good) *Kehring* coincides with his discovery of Kierkegaard. The second (bad) *Kehring*, in turn, coincides with Heidegger's turning away from Kierkegaard to greater involvement with Nietzsche, Hölderlin and the Presocratics. (DH 5-6) Second, Caputo uses images from Kierkegaard to characterize the fundamental mood and tendency of Heidegger's thought. (DH 62) Third, Caputo identifies crucial elements of Heidegger's thought as more or less modified (and frequently unacknowledged) borrowings from Kierkegaard. (DH 48,181) Fourth, he uses Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms to parody the grandiosity of Heidegger at his worst. (DH 74)

Finally and most controversially, Caputo tightly links Kierkegaard with three French postmodernists that figure prominently in his account of the Heidegger affair: Levinas, Lyotard, and Derrida.

In his conclusion, Caputo writes:

What is missing from Heidegger, what Heidegger always missed and excluded, what he never managed to think or come to grips with, is the jewgreek economy that runs through Kierkegaard, Levinas, Derrida, and Lyotard....(DH 211)

With this linking of names, Caputo takes a position on the controversial question of Kierkegaard and postmodernism. Frequently, arguments for such an alignment are couched in terms of Kierkegaard's rhetorical strategies, his use of pseudonymity and irony, his penchant for constructing self-consuming literary artifacts. But in speaking of a shared "jewgreek economy," Caputo makes his case for so aligning Kierkegaard on a broader and more substantial basis. Most straightforwardly, "jewgreek" denotes a joining of the Hebraic and the Hellenic, the spiritual commerce between Athens and Jerusalem. So co-implicated are "jew" and "greek" in Kierkegaard that it has always been impossible to classify him neatly as a philosopher or as a theologian. He works the faultlines that lie between the two, always insisting on their difference but never allowing either to go its way undisturbed by the other. As Caputo points out, such a bringing together of the biblical and the philosophical is nowhere more evident in the twentieth century than in Levinas. He further argues for a similar if more subtle interweaving of the two in Derrida.<sup>2</sup> But Caputo's aligning of Kierkegaard with the French postmodernists is based on more than some generic bringing together of the Greek and the Jewish. Caputo insists on a richer significance of the term:

Jewgreek thinking watches very closely to see what philosophy abolishes as irrational, unnatural, and particularist in virtue of the intimidating power and prestige of reason, nature, universality, and humanity.(DH 211)

The jewgreek is not other than philosophy, not simply other, because we — who are "we"? — are all Greek, always and already Greek, and philosophical conceptuality is — for those of us who have been enculturated in the Euro-world — an inescapable given. But by putting the question of the other *to* philosophy, jewgreek thinking in fact raises the question of the other *of* philosophy. The jewgreek experience of the other, the passionate intensity of a jewgreek poetics or quasi-ethics of mercy or *kardia*, irrupts in the center of philosophy and disrupts its project of comprehension....The oddity and impurity of the jewgreek is its focus on what has been "excluded," its hyperbolic sensitivity to the claim of the other, its demand for justice for the least among us, for the despised, the different, the dispossessed, and the helpless.(DH 212-213)

Caputo has chosen well in making this concept, "jewgreek," the site for



an alignment of Kierkegaard with French postmodernism. The shared themes that emerge as Caputo unpacks the concept are unmistakable. There is a shared interest in saving the particular from subsumption under the universal, a questioning of the way "reason" functions to legitimate the power of the powerful, a protest against the disinterested "project of comprehension," and a statement of the claims of the neighbor (in the biblical sense of the term). On these points, all of which involve pressing the claims of some other against some monolithic sameness, I wholeheartedly concur with Caputo that Kierkegaard is the spiritual and intellectual comrade of the French postmodernists.

But something is very strange about Caputo's project of alignment, nonetheless. To see this, we need to return to the topic of myth. The book's title, of course, is *Demythologizing Heidegger*. As Caputo points out, "demythologizing" may easily be mistaken to denote a distilling of fact from fiction. But Caputo denies the possibility of escaping myth. Instead, he contrasts pernicious myth and beneficial myth.

...[I]t is not a question of getting beyond myth or laying aside metaphysics, but rather of inventing new and more salutary myths, or of recovering other and older myths, myths to counter the destructive myths of violence, domination, patriarchy, and hierarchy... The issue, then, is not divided between mythologizing and demythologizing... but between dangerous myths and salutary myths; between privileging, elitist, and hierarchizing myths and myths that promote justice and multiplicity; between exclusionary and oppressive myths and liberating, empowering myths.

The question of "demythologizing Heidegger" then comes down to the task of disrupting the myth of Being with the myth of Justice....(DH 3)

There is something disturbingly circular about Caputo's proposal here to use one myth, the myth of Justice, as the criterion by which to judge whether other myths are salutary or dangerous. For the question is close at hand as to the legitimacy (the salutary character!) of the myth of Justice itself. When we recall the etymological connection of "salutary" to the Latin "*salus*" (=health), we see that Caputo has described the evaluation of myths in surprisingly Nietzschean terms. In his revaluation of values, Nietzsche labels Caputo's "myth of justice" (i.e. love for "the least of these") as dangerous and the "privileging, elitist, hierarchizing myths" (though certainly not the "myth of Being") as salutary. Caputo's refusal to move beyond talk of myth to assert the objective truth of (at least some) value claims makes it difficult to see how he could adequately respond to such challenges.<sup>3</sup> But Caputo is wedded, nonetheless to speaking of a *myth* of justice because he believes justice is necessarily utopian, an ideal unrealized and unrealizable at any time or place.

...[T]o instantiate a mythic structure, to say it was actualized here or there, in some place or people, some language or age, is to institute privileged times and privileged places, to authorize hierarchization

and elitist rank-orderings among existing beings. Justice cannot be localized, pinned down to a place or a time. The myth of justice does not take the form of a geophilosophical myth precisely because it is a myth of what is owed to the homeless and uprooted. The condition of the possibility of a salutary myth, which is also its condition of impossibility, is that it is not actual. Justice does not belong to a time that can be recalled, recollected, interiorized, repeated, to a time that was or has been all along, but to time immemorial, a time remembered, to unrememberable time, an impossible time that never was actual even as it calls out incessantly for actualization. Or to a place, to some land or soil, some nation or fatherland.

That brings us in sharp contrast with Heidegger's mythologizing operation, which, as we have seen, consists precisely in locating the mythic space in actuality, giving it a historical name, attaching it to "this people" (two of them, actually)[Greece and Germany]. The whole idea behind the myth of justice is to avoid playing favorites, which is why the myth of justice is betrayed by locating a chosen people (the Jews), or the people of God (the Christians), as if some people were and some people were not God's, as if God prefers Jews to Egyptians, Christians to Jews, Europeans to non-Westerners, and so on. The whole idea of justice is not to exclude anyone from the kingdom, which means the kingdom is nowhere in particular. (DH190)

It is in this passage that the radical incompatibility of Kierkegaard and Caputo emerges. Undoubtedly, the universality of God's love is a fundamental Kierkegaardian theme. But note that Caputo, while appealing to Kierkegaard, actually reverses Kierkegaard's characterization of the Greek and the Christian. For Caputo, Heidegger went astray by crediting some of the Greeks with a special insight and, consequently, a unique standing. Caputo challenges and subverts such privilegings by invoking the universality implicit in biblical demands for love and justice.

In contrast, Kierkegaard, especially in the *Climacus* texts, associates the Greeks with universality, with the idea that the truth is within us all and only needs to be recollected, perhaps under the guidance of a Socratic teacher. In the *Postscript*, he labels this perspective Religiousness A. Further, Kierkegaard identifies Christianity (=Religiousness B) with the scandalous notion that humans have somehow divorced themselves from the truth and can only be restored to the truth by a special relation to a special teacher, the god-man, who appeared at a particular time and a particular place.

Thus, where Caputo condemns the privileged particularity of Heidegger's "pure Greek" myth of Being and seeks to correct it with biblical universality, Kierkegaard associates universality with the Greeks and the scandal of privileged particularity with the Christian notion that no one can come to God except through the Son, Jesus. This Christian notion of privileged particularity has, of course, its analog in the Jewish self-identification as God's chosen people. Caputo notes these claims to particular privileged status in the quotation above, but he dismisses them as unfortu-

nate departures from the core biblical message of equality and universality. Kierkegaard, in contrast, makes such claims the scandalous essence of Christianity.

Is the disagreement between Caputo and Kierkegaard simply a matter of the two identifying different aspects of Christianity as the kerygma of the faith? No. For Kierkegaard agrees with Caputo that the love of the neighbor is the heart and soul of biblical faith. But, unlike Caputo, Kierkegaard sees that ethical message as indissolubly linked to the revelational character of that faith. In *Works of Love*, a text Caputo nowhere cites in this book, Kierkegaard argues that the Christian command to love one's neighbor as oneself is a scandal and bafflement to human reason. It is an ethical view that "did not rise up in any human's heart":

You *shall* love — this, then, is the word of the *royal law*. And truly, my reader, if you are capable of forming a conception of the conditions in the world before these words were spoken, or if you strive to understand yourself and give heed to the lives and dispositions of those who, although they call themselves Christians, really live within pagan concepts — then in relation to this Christian imperative, as in relation to everything Christian, you will humbly confess with the wonder of faith that such a command did not spring up in any human heart.... What courage it takes to say for the first time, "You *shall* love," or, more correctly, what divine authority it takes to turn natural man's conceptions and ideas upside-down with this phrase! For there at the boundary where human speech halts and courage forsakes one, there revelation breaks forth with divine creativeness and proclaims what it is not difficult to understand in the sense of profundity or human parallels, but which still did not rise up in any human heart....(WL 40-41)

All this is rather too ontotheologic for Caputo. For to acknowledge such a God is to fall into just the sorts of bad myths of monogenesis and presence and hierarchy and actuality which Caputo argues led to Heidegger's Nazism. Caputo's resistance to the idea of a transcendent, real God is evident when he uses Derrida to correct Levinas's "ethico-theo-logical" excesses.

The Levinasian gesture that requires deconstruction, even demythologization, is to reify this infinity [of the demands of justice], to make it a metaphysical being — which Levinas cannot call Being and will not call a mere fiction. The Levinasian gesture is like the Heideggerian to just this extent: that it attributes actuality or reality to what it valorizes, that it claims this infinity is real, *ad literam*, *ad infinitum*. But in Derrida, the quasi infinity of undeconstructible justice is neither Being nor otherwise than Being; the excess is not the excess of being but the excess of a linguistic performance....(DH 200)

To see how far Caputo and Derrida are from Kierkegaard on this point I recommend Merold Westphal's recent work showing that Kierkegaard's

notion of God is much more robustly transcendent than is Levinas's.<sup>4</sup>

But Kierkegaard's theological benightedness, by Caputo's standards, involves a transgression even worse than belief in a transcendent, "ontotheologic" God. As Kierkegaard sees it, God's revelation of the "royal law" to love one's neighbor is radically particular: first, through the Old Testament prophets and then, preeminently, through the life and death of Jesus. Kierkegaard's belief in the unique revelational status of a particular Semitic tribe and a peculiar Judean carpenter is formally identical to Heidegger's belief in the unique revelational status of the presocratic Greeks. Not only does this observation make Caputo's enlisting of Kierkegaard in his project of "demythologizing Heidegger" highly questionable but it exposes how outrageous Caputo's explanation of Heidegger's Nazism really is. For Caputo fundamentally doesn't trace Heidegger's Nazism to particular features of the presocratics Greeks and their vision of Being. Rather, it is the sin of privileging, of singling out one people or time or event or revelation or savior over others, *per se*, that Caputo decries. He makes this clear on the first page of his book in a passage already quoted above. There, Caputo asserts that the Greeks represent for Heidegger "an overarching normative claiming to which we — and who "we" are is a critical issue here — are all bound more primordial-ly than we can say and in reference to which everything later is to be compared, either as a falling away and oblivion or as the scene of its retrieval." (DH 1) Note that such a broadly stated indictment sweeps up a host of faiths and ideologies that are indexed to some particular, normative origin — most notably for our purposes God's covenant with Abraham in the case of the Jews and God's revelation of Godself in Jesus for Christians, but also potentially the American political ideology that attributes such a normative status to the Declaration of Independence and Constitution.

The problem is that there are many differences between the particularities that are singled out as normative. And it is Caputo's failure to attend to these differences in the various particularisms that leads him to tar them all with a single brush. Nazi particularism is racist — the Aryan race is regarded as uniquely worthy and gifted. In contrast, the particular significance of the Greeks for Heidegger relates to the special revelation of Being he believed them to have received. Note that Heidegger thought that vision of Being was crucially important to humankind generally, and he accordingly devoted much of his philosophical career to communicating that vision to the modern world. While the significance of the Greek understanding of Being is universal, the source and much more importantly the idiom of that understanding is particular. According to Heidegger, Greek and its linguistic soulmate, German, are uniquely conducive to philosophical thought — thus leading Heidegger to assert that the French need to learn German if they really want to think philosophically. While this assertion of linguistic particularism is implausible and offensive, it isn't exclusive in the same way that Nazism is. It is easier to learn German than it is to become Aryan. Further, Heidegger's linguistic particularism doesn't obviously set anyone outside the pale of ethical consideration in the way Nazism does. Jewish particularism, in turn, relates to the belief that Jews are the chosen people, that they stand in a special covenantal

relation to God. But while being Jewish is (typically) a matter of lineage, there is a strong sense in Biblical Judaism that the Jewish people's particular relation to God is of universal significance, that all the nations of the earth will come to the mountain of the Lord and be blessed through the special covenant of God with the Jewish people. (Micah 4) This self-overcoming version of particularism receives an even more definite expression in Christianity. Jesus Christ, the particular man, living and dying at a particular place and time, is the one who overcomes all particularities, male and female, Jew and Gentile, slave and free, rich and poor. And as Kierkegaard so frequently notes, before the paradox of the incarnate God, the relative distinctions between the clever and the simple are set at naught.

It is clear then that there are big differences in the particularities affirmed in these various cases. In at least one instance, the Nazis, the exclusion of others from ethical regard follows naturally from the form of particularity affirmed. But in the case of Heidegger's Greeks, such a consequence is dubious, and in the cases of Judaism and Christianity, it is explicitly excluded by the specific character of the particularity affirmed. Once again, the problem is that Caputo doesn't make these distinctions. Rather, it is the privileging of any particularity, *per se*, that he targets. In a passage quoted above, Caputo opposed the myth of justice to any notion of a chosen people (the Jews) or a people of God (Christians), to any notion of a privileged time or place, to any "elitist rank orderings among existing beings," (DH 190) since he views all such assignments of ultimate significance to particularities as inevitably exclusionary. He writes, "The whole idea of justice is not to exclude anyone from the kingdom, which means the kingdom is nowhere in particular." (DH 190) But what of a privileged epistemological particularity (a revelation) or a privileged soteriological particularity (a savior) that was both of ultimate significance and yet not exclusionary in the way Caputo finds objectionable? Why can't one who believes that God has uniquely revealed Godself in Jesus also insist on treating even those who don't share such a belief with the respect they deserve as children of God and beneficiaries of Christ's self-sacrificial love? Kierkegaard, for one, believed that such a conclusion should be drawn.

Caputo, in contrast, thinks that all claims of unique significance for particularities, be they races, nations, people, or revelations, all notions of "primordial incipience" and "monogenesis," are inherently invidiously exclusionary and are thus "dangerous" and "oppressive." So, in spite of his claim to invoke Christianity as a corrective to Heidegger's Nazism, in spite of his assertion that Heidegger's movement toward Nazism began with a flawed reading of biblical texts and culminated in a purging of biblical traces from his thought, Caputo implicitly accuses Christianity and every other religion that appeals to special revelation of Nazi tendencies.

In closing, I will comment on this essay's title, "Deconstructing Caputo's *Demythologizing Heidegger*." I take deconstruction to designate reading a text so as to find tendencies and implications that are different from and even directly opposed to the explicit, self-described project of the text. We see a number of such internal rifts in Caputo's book. First, though it presents itself preeminently as a historical text reconstructing the

development of Heidegger's thought, I have argued that it is more plausibly read as a plea for a particular version of "multiculturalism." Second, though Caputo repeatedly invokes Kierkegaard as a corrective to Heidegger, his criticisms of Heidegger are so diffuse as to include Kierkegaard as well. Third, while it is overtly an impassioned plea for the biblical witness to leaven the philosophical loaf, Caputo's book actually represents a slander against that biblical witness. In asserting that Heidegger's thought is genuinely Nazi because of his belief that something had been uniquely revealed to the Greeks, Caputo is actually labeling all claims to special revelation as fundamentally Nazi in character. Finally, after (correctly) accusing Heidegger of failing to adequately distinguish between the Greek and the Christian, Caputo himself fails to distinguish the various particularities characteristic of Nazis, Heidegger's Greeks, Judaism and Christianity, respectively.

For an author who touts the post-modern liberation from the sterility of Enlightenment Rationalism, Caputo's fundamental argument is ironically reminiscent of Lessing's *Nathan the Wise*: people of various faiths can get along with each other by renouncing claims to special revelation and by emphasizing those faiths' common ethical teachings. And Caputo's belief that the "myth of justice" at the heart of the biblical tradition can be separated from those parts of the tradition that speak of chosen people, unique incarnation, and special revelation is distinctly similar to Kant's attempt in *Religion within the Bounds of Reason Alone* to refine the ethical gold of the Christian religion out of its mixture with superstitious slag.

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#### SIGLA

DH John Caputo, *Demythologizing Heidegger* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

WL Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962).

#### NOTES

1. Caputo offers extensive discussion of these three thinkers in his *Against Ethics: Contributions to a Poetics of Obligation with Constant Reference to Deconstruction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), a book that bears significantly on the themes explored in *Demythologizing Heidegger*.

2. See also Caputo's "The Good News about Alterity: Derrida and Theology," *Faith and Philosophy*, 10:4 (October, 1993) 453-470.

3. I hesitate to use the term "ethical teachings" here given Caputo's recent *Against Ethics*. Still, I use it for want of a better term to cover those matters that Caputo associates with the phrase "the myth of justice."

4. Merold Westphal, "Levinas, Kierkegaard and the Theological Task," *Modern Theology* 8:3 (July, 1992) 241-262.